

An Interview with Samuel Jablon



Installation view. Left to right: 'Time at Wine' (2016) and 'Life' (2015).

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By RASHAWN GRIFFIN, APR 2016

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I met Samuel when I was critiquing as a visiting artist at Brooklyn College, and he was in a graduate school. People said terrible things like “stop making word paintings” and “you don’t want to be a word painter,” and I was like “I don’t know, that sounds crazy, these are great.” Luckily he didn’t listen to them (and probably not me either) and kept his chatty paintings going.

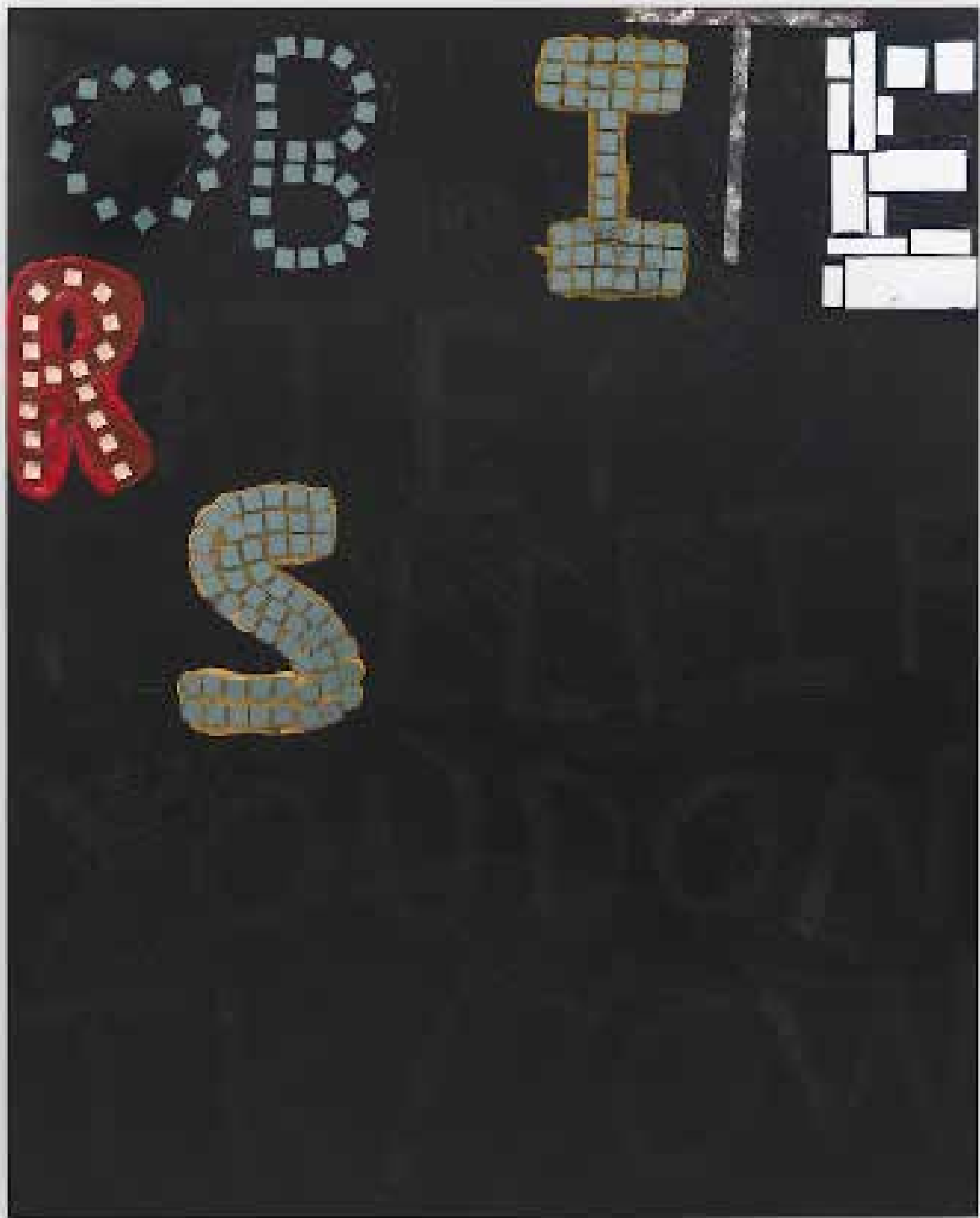
We’ve stayed in touch since then, and fortunately his work is becoming well known in New York. Currently he has two shows up at Freight + Volume in the Lower East Side and in Harlem at Arts + Leisure. My friend Jim [James Hyde] told me I would like them, and he was right. When I describe Sam’s work, it’s a combination of mixed half-statements, declarations, jumbled non-sequiturs, found language, wit, and formal ingenuity all spewed into an awkward finger-painted blender, spit out and cemented in place like, well, glass tiles in concrete. They speak to me. He uses the materiality of paint to eschewed ideas about how the written language works. They’re unselfconscious and deliberate. I interviewed him around some of his ideas about words, paint, and painting.

Rashawn Griffin: Hey Sam, so what are you reading right now?

Samuel Jablon: I am reading *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen.

RG: Do you read any poets as well?

SJ: Yeah, I am always reading poetry. Lately I’ve been reading Bill Berkson, Ben Lerner and Yuko Otomo.



Samuel Johnson: "If you don't know, now you know" (2015). acrylic, mirror and glass tile on wood panel (50 1/2 x 48 inches)

RG: Can I ask you about the “Poet Sculpture” — Is there a relationship between the performative nature of that work, and how language functions in your paintings?

SJ: The language is similar in both the objects and the performances, but functions very differently. Sometimes I read the language from the objects as poems on their own. I start off a project usually with text, and I always ask myself what the project should be that is, a performance, poem or painting. My work tends to deal a lot with time, public space and advertisements, and the language or phrases that cycle around those ideas. I'm curious how poetry changes as it is brought into different environments. I find it exciting to jump from a performance, to a painting and then back to a poem.



Samuel Jablon, “Beautiful Everything” (2016), acrylic, mirror and glass tile on wood panel (72x60 inches)

RG: Do you think painting is like that too? Does it change, or does it excite you to switch it to new environments? Or is there just one perfect place for a painting?

SJ: I don't plan works out, and the process of painting guides me to the end result. Colors change almost instantly, texture obliterates layers and I always have this sense of what can I change, how can I fuck this up, what will make the work jarring or subtle. I don't think painting has one perfect place; it changes a lot when the works leave the studio and are in the gallery. My perception of them changes, and I think I see the work for what it is, because in the studio it takes me a while to actually see the work. That's what's great about painting; you can constantly see things differently.



Samuel Johnson, "Life" (2015) acrylic, mirror and glass tile on wood panel (44x68 inches)

RG: A few new paintings you showed me have one word rather than groups. One of your new "Ugly"s for example, looked purple, almost like a sign or symbol. I always think of the quotes having a closed circuit quality, like they don't care about me cause they'll keep doing what they are doing, but simple ones keep pointing elsewhere. A little endless, is this a newer development? Maybe I'm just reading into this.

SJ: You saw an early version of a painting I later painted over. That ugly painting became a gold painting with a text that reads, "Life is Fine." I think you are correct in noticing the change. For me the new work is more about painting, and less about the text. For my last show I was primarily concerned about the text, and creating that endless loop in a painting. This new work points to something new, it points to painting. This work is elusive, textured and monotone. It is less legible with the text blending into paint.



Samuel Jablon, "Loving It" (2015), acrylic and glass tile on waxed panel (72x60 inches)

RG: I'm curious about your palette. Can you talk about how color enters in your work?

SJ: I find color to be bold and challenging. For me color gives the work its identity, it's about paint and painting. Color builds a tension, creates beauty or creates ugliness. I choose colors rather intuitively, my work is very rooted in process, sometimes I don't know what color to use until I am using it, and think that it is working.

RG: That's really interesting. I always think you can tell a lot about content from an artist's palette. For example Kay Rosen, Matthew Brannon, or even Glen Ligon could say to borrow from palettes used in graphic. Its the color we're used to seeing language in. Though the subject matter is language, your palette distinguishes itself from how we see language — very painterly and very your own. Am I wrong here or is this intentional?

SJ: I think you are right, an artist's palette says a lot about the work and the artist. I intentionally choose the colors, even if that choice is intuitive. I use material, language and color from what's around me. I'm very influenced by my environment. I don't think language is the sole content in these works, color and texture hold equal content. I wanted the works to be about painting as much as they are about language. I'm interested in materiality and the tension between what can be seen and what is legible.



Samuel Johnson "Please us Wine" (2016), acrylic and glass tile on wood panel (90x73 inches)

RG: Are there any painters that interest you?

SJ: Pope.L and Alfred Jenson always interest me. WM

Samuel Jablon's Life Is Fine is showing concurrently at Freight+Volume in the Lower East Side and Arts+Leisure in Harlem, April 9th-May 15th.



RASHAWN GRIFFIN

Rashawn Griffin was born in 1980 in Los Angeles, California. Living and working in New York City, he received a MFA from Yale University in 2005. He was a 2006 resident of the Studio Museum in Harlem's AIR program.

His work has been exhibited widely, including the 2008 Whitney Biennial, a two-person exhibition at the Studio Museum (RSVP), as well as "Freeway Balconies" at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, Germany, and "Black Now" at the Longwood Gallery in the Bronx, New York, curated by Collier Schorr and Fred Wilson respectively.

Griffin was recently the subject of the solo exhibition "A hole-in-the-wall country" at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Overland Park, Kansas, as well as the exhibition "Minimal Baroque" at Rønnebæksholm in Næstved, Denmark.

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